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MEMORANDUM

TO: Heads of Fire Departments and Building Inspectors

FROM: Stephen D. Coan and Thomas Gatzunis,
State Fire Marshal Commissioner DPS

DATE: February 1, 2009

SUBJECT: Curtain Vestibules

Due to energy conservation measures we are aware that “temporary” curtain vestibules are being created and installed within buildings. While current Massachusetts Regulations do not specifically prohibit these curtain vestibule systems, the guidance provided in this Memorandum should prove helpful. Curtain vestibules typically consist of a series of fabric curtains suspended from a metal piping/framing system and are used to create a temporary enclosure or vestibule around an entryway (inside or outside). The goal of this curtain vestibule system is to cut down on the cold air entering an establishment.

In order to provide guidance to Fire and Building Officials on the installation of these curtain vestibule systems, the following is provided:

1. A building permit must be obtained and building permit application construction documents should include and address:
 - i. A plan of where the curtain vestibule is to be located.
 - ii. Details demonstrating that the required means of egress are not negatively impacted by the curtain vestibule system, including a determination that the occupant load and egress criteria are still met.

- iii. Details on the curtain, hangers, and support to ensure the “vestibule system” will remain securely in place or otherwise not hamper egress regardless of the crowd impact in an emergency situation.
 - iv. Determination, coupled w/inspection verification, that exit pathways are not obstructed – i.e., the curtain is easily and predictably movable; that exit signage and emergency lighting are not masked or that any fire sprinkler heads are not masked by the curtain vestibule system or otherwise, that such masking of egress elements or fire sprinklers have been addressed in a revamped design and modification that is Building Code compliant.
2. The curtains system must comply with 527 CMR 21 and Chapter 8 of 780 CMR, which both reference NFPA 701, Standard Methods of Fire Tests for Flame Propagation of Textiles and Films. The documentation showing compliance must be submitted to both the Fire and Building Official.

If the above criteria can't be met then a Building Permit should not be issued until compliance is demonstrated.

If a Building or Fire Official should encounter an existing curtain vestibule system, such system must comply with the guidance/criteria provided herein. In addition, a Building Permit is required to be issued by the Building Department. In the interim, before compliance is demonstrated, the removal of the curtain vestibule system is required, as an impediment to egress under either 780 CMR or 527 CMR and citation of such Building Code and/or Fire Code. Fire and Building officials are encouraged to work together in reviewing and inspecting this type of installation.

If fire officials have any questions, or require assistance, please contact the Code Compliance & Enforcement Unit at (978) 567-3375 or in western Massachusetts at (413) 587-3181. Building Officials please contact your District State Inspector or the Department of Public Safety at 617-727-3200.